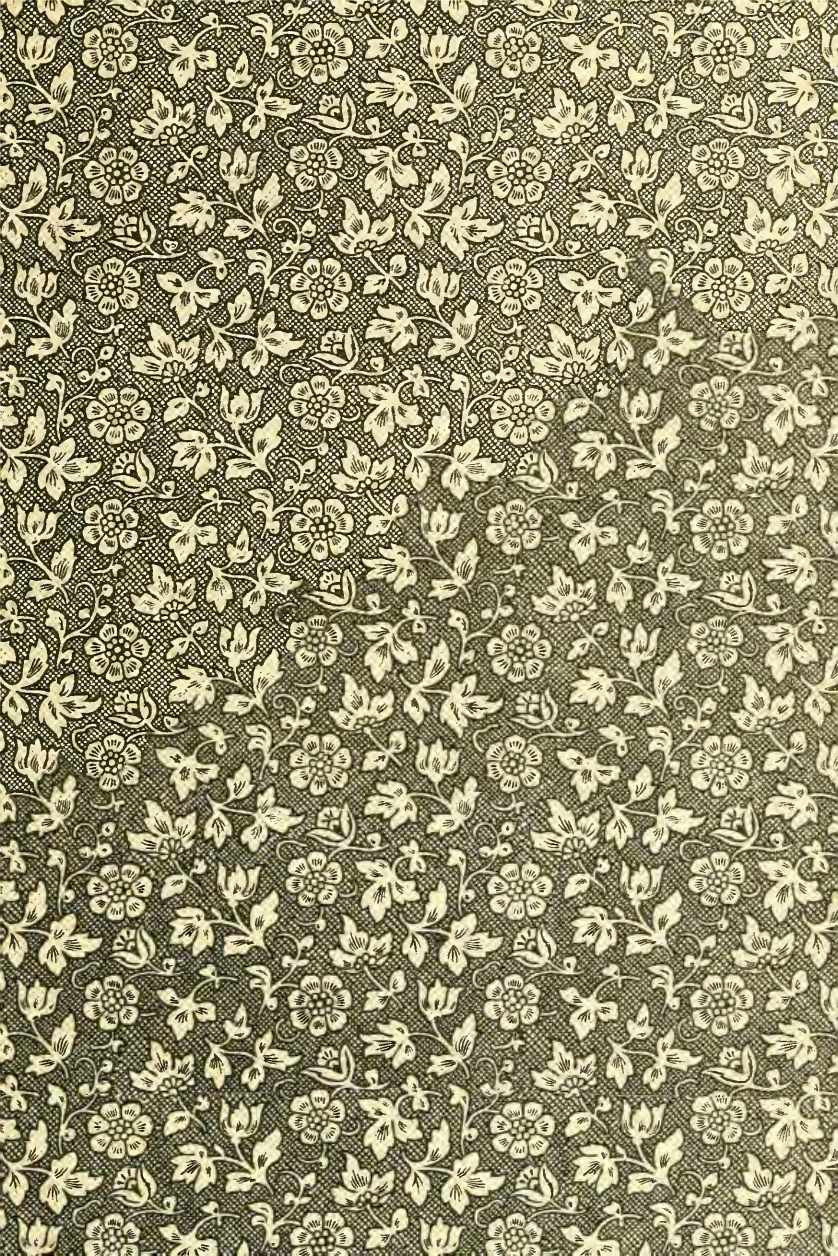


Religious Life of  
Abraham Lincoln  
PRITCHARD









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# THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN



A Centennial Sermon Preached in  
the Westchester Congregational  
Church, Scarsdale Congre-  
gation, by  
Rev. ARTHUR O. PRITCHARD  
February 7, 1909







He that abideth in Me and I in him,  
the same beareth much fruit, for  
apart from Me, ye can do nothing.

John 15:5.

\* \* \*

This day the Churches throughout the land, join their voices with the great multitude of mankind to do honor to the life of Abraham Lincoln. A man so distinctly American that one has dared to call him the First American. A ruler so genuinely a man that we give him the attributes of a brother, rather than the attributes of a king. A citizen so noble, so exalted, so patriotic, that even foes counted him their best and truest friend. To this man of the plain people, we to-day do homage.

And yet it is a sign of our country's growth in Christian things that we consider him at all in a Christian Church. Among the strongest opponents of Mr. Lincoln's election as President, were the clergy of his own town, Springfield, Ill. Twenty out of the twenty-three ministers, and a large majority of the church members, were against him. This gave Mr. Lincoln much concern, and at times he expressed himself freely about it. But the influence of these men was not very great, although many were seriously troubled that such a good and honest man should not be a member of the Christian Church.

This wonder was somewhat strengthened by two incidents in his life, which were widely used by those who opposed him on religious grounds. One was the fact that, when young, he had written an essay reviewing Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason" and Volney's "Ruines," which essay was pronouncedly atheistic. It mattered not that he was but twenty-five when he wrote it, that it was written to be read before a literary society of New Salem, that before it was read it was burned by a friend—his enemies and critics have often used the story to prove his agnosticism.

The other evidence used by his enemies was a chance remark which he made about some of the preachers of his time. Clergymen were much given to doctrinal discussions, along in the half century before the Civil War. Lincoln's plain, practical common sense put him

out of sympathy with much of this speculation, and he consistently refused to attend any of these battles of words. One careless remark was widely quoted.

"An eminent clergyman," Nicolay tells us, "was delivering a series of doctrinal discourses, that attracted considerable local attention. Lincoln remarked, when refusing to attend, 'that he wouldn't trust Brother ——— to construe the statutes of Illinois, and much less, the laws of God; people who knew him wouldn't trust his advice on an ordinary business transaction, because they didn't consider him competent; hence, he didn't see why they did so in the most important of all human affairs—the salvation of souls.'"

Such words, of course, stung the ministers, and it was rather natural they should resent it. To the credit of all, let it be said, that when the first gun was fired against Sumter, the Springfield preachers, and almost all the Christian people of the North, displayed their patriotism and their loyalty to their chosen ruler.

I have quoted these incidents because they illustrate the point of view, that has not entirely gone from us, that Mr. Lincoln was not a Christian man. In contrast with this, I wish to point out this morning those elements in Mr. Lincoln's character which place him in the very front rank of our religious leaders; for it is my honest conviction that few, if any, of our Presidents have had the deep, vital, and practical religious life of Abraham Lincoln.

As a starting point in our thought, we naturally ask: "What do we mean by the religious man? Mr. Lincoln was not a church member. He did not believe many of the theological tenets of the church. He was not backward, at times, in expressing his opposition to the existing forms of religion. How, then, can you say he was one of the most religious leaders that this country has produced?"

In giving a definition of a religious man, let us first turn to the old prophet, Micah. In the sixth chapter and the eighth verse, we find: "What doth God require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Again, in the Epistle of James, we read: "Pure religion and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

As a modern scientific statement, I want to quote from one of the leading Christian educators of the day, Dr. Henry S. Pritchett, formerly President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In an address to his students, entitled "What is Religion?" he says: "According to the thinking of men of science, behind all nature, be-

hind all life, behind all our visible forms of energy, stands an infinite and eternal energy, whom we call God. Just as from the sun the energy of sunlight streams down upon the earth and is transformed into all living things, all forms of beauty, all flowers, all motions, and all life of our planet, so also the infinite and eternal energy radiates into all the universe, the source of all energy, whether of the body, of the mind, or of the spirit. Into every human soul this divine energy falls, just as the sunlight falls upon the flowers, and every human soul becomes a transformer of that energy.

"To receive this divine energy into one's soul and to transform it effectively into those spiritual forms which make for justice, mercy, joy, unselfishness, serenity of mind and of life—this is true religion. If in your heart this divine transformation is not going on, day by day, and year by year, you are not a religious man, no matter what your denominational connections, or your formal professions, may be. And if, on the other hand, in the soil of your heart, these flowers are growing, it matters not what you call yourself. It is the life in your own soul which determines whether you are a religious man, not the things that you believe, or the name that you call yourself."

I have quoted this at length, that we may see how the best scientific thought of our day is in harmony with the words of Jesus.

"He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit, for apart from Me, ye can do nothing.

"Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was ahungred and ye gave Me meat; I was thirsty and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger and ye took Me in; naked and ye clothed Me; I was sick and ye visited Me; I was in prison and ye came unto Me. \* \* \* Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, My brethren, ye did it unto Me."

With these definitions before us, our question becomes this: Was Abraham Lincoln one who believed in God as the source of all energy, and who received this divine energy into his soul and transformed it effectively into those spiritual forms which led him to give meat to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing to the naked, comfort to the sick, hope to the imprisoned? It is to this question that we now turn our attention.

If ever any man believed in God, to the very tips of his fingers, that man was Abraham Lincoln. Born in the simplicity of a rough frontier life, where belief in a Supreme Being is next to belief in one's self, with almost no textbook but this Word of God, with a responsibility in life which but few men in this world have ever

had thrust upon them,—it would be strange indeed if he did not believe in a God.

But this belief was more than an intellectual assent. He believed in a God with all the fervor of his honest soul. It was a belief so strong, so pervasive, so genuine, that President Schurman, of Cornell University, has been led to say: "I wish to say deliberately, after reading many lives of Lincoln, and trying to understand the history of the Civil War, that, in my opinion, the Union could not have been restored without the unseen, but not the less real, power that came to the nation through Lincoln's belief in God and confidence in His moral government of the world."

The speeches and recorded conversations of the great President fully bear out this assertion. A familiar quotation from one of his speeches is: "I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right; but it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

No one can read his Second Inaugural without realizing that in the mind of the man who wrote it, there was a deep, fundamental belief in the righteousness of God. The London Times spoke of it as the "most sublime state paper of the century."

When it was written, it was a dark hour in the history of the conflict. For four years the country had been drenched in blood. The end of the struggle was not yet in sight. Personal enemies were on every hand. The sorrows of millions of hearts were fresh and agonizing. A small man might have descended to a political harangue. A demagogue would have roused the passions of a sensitive multitude. A Godless man attempted to explain the cause of failure, or have outlined the road to success. Not so Lincoln. With a soul humble before God, yet courageous and lofty before his fellows, he dared to say:

"Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil, shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

It took a great man to say that when he bore the responsibility. Yes, Abraham Lincoln believed in a God.

But, more than believing in His ruling power, he believed abso-



lutely that the sources of his own strength was in God, and that he was responsible directly to Him.

John Hay and John Nicolay, as his private secretaries, were daily in contact with him during the war. It is their testimony that from the day he left Springfield to take up the nation's leadership until his last breath, "there is not an expression known to have come from his lips, or his pen, but proves that he held himself answerable in every act of his career to a more august tribunal than any on earth."

Nothing manifests the true religious temper of a man more than his attitude toward prayer. Lincoln was a profound believer in prayer. His state papers show it. It is a matter of history, as clearly shown in the diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, that in regard to the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Mr. Lincoln made a covenant with God. The covenant was this: "If God gave us the victory in the approaching battle (Antietam) he would consider it an indication of divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right—was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results."

Incidents like the following are given by all his biographers: A clergyman from a little village of Central New York went to Washington to recover the body of a gallant young captain, who had been killed at the second Battle of Bull Run.

Before leaving, the clergyman visited the President and assured him of the confidence of the people of the North. "You must know," he said, "that no pious father or mother ever kneels in prayer these days without asking God to give you strength and wisdom."

The tears filled Lincoln's eyes as he thanked the visitor and said: "But for those prayers I should have faltered, and perhaps failed, long ago."

As the clergyman started to go, Mr. Lincoln held him and said: "I suppose I may consider this a sort of pastoral call. Out in our country, when a parson made a pastoral call, it was always the custom for the folks to ask him to lead in prayer, and I would like to have you pray with me today, asking for strength and wisdom."

The two men knelt, and as they arose, Lincoln grasped his visitor's hand and remarked: "I feel better."

He once remarked to a friend: "I have been driven, many times, to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere

else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day."

Looking back to our original definition of a religious man, there can be no doubt that Mr. Lincoln believed in and opened his soul to receive the divine energy from the great Father of us all.

It remains for us to see if he transformed this divine energy into those spiritual forms which make for justice, mercy, joy, unselfishness, and serenity of mind and of life. To ask this question is almost to answer it.

In discussing this, I wish to dwell on but two aspects of his noble character—his inherent honesty, and his great sympathy.

When we speak of Mr. Lincoln's honesty we do not mean his truthfulness alone; we mean his correspondence with the world of nature as it is; his ability to understand and to see facts as they are—nothing distorted by self-deception or prejudice, nothing exaggerated by egotism or an unwise optimism. Before any other man in the country, he saw the conflicting elements of the secession movement in their true proportion, and in their true perspective. He understood the issue at stake, and when he declared a "house divided against itself cannot stand. I do not expect this nation to fall, but I do expect it will cease to be divided"—that instant the air was cleared and men who had been groping in the darkness, beheld the light.

Lincoln's cabinet was, in some respects, the greatest problem of the war. Composed of men representing the different factions that went to make up the Republican party; all strong leaders, some of them arrogant and ambitious—altogether a most unruly body of men. Yet the honest soul of Lincoln stood like a rock in the midst of that small, but violent, company—the one whom they all trusted—the one whom they finally all obeyed—the one whom they knew understood them as well as he did the country. Mr. Lincoln's inherent honesty alone saved the nation from the selfish, ambitious, hot-headed, prejudiced plans of his so-called advisers.

This sterling quality of Mr. Lincoln, so free from any personal ambition, so charitable, even to his most malicious enemy, was the supreme manifestation of the divine life within him. It had its roots in all parts of the man—his stalwart physical manhood, his clear, keen, discerning mind, his great, bursting heart. All of these combined gave utterance to the one true, faithful personality. A man may be said to reveal the life of the divine, in proportion as he rises above and is unaffected by the things of earth. No man in our national life has been so free from personal prejudice and un-

worthy ambition; no man has been so able to push back the designing plans of his selfish contemporaries; no President has been closer to the true heart of the people; no man has held to his task with a greater fidelity to the right, as he saw it, than Abraham Lincoln. Because of this, he—to me—surpasses all of our national heroes in his spiritual nature.

As for his sympathy, his brotherliness, it has almost become proverbial. I have selected it because, more than any other characteristic, it reveals what, to me, is the greatest sign of the Christian spirit—the ability to put yourself in the other man's place. Lincoln not only could see things as they were, but he had also the marvelous ability of seeing them as others saw them. He could enter into another's little world and feel, with him, the trials and opportunities of his life.

Most of the stories told of Lincoln's sympathy have to do with his pardons and tender experiences with bereaved fathers and mothers, but these are only one side of that wonderful nature, which could enter with another into his hopes and joys. Although a ruler, he never failed to feel as a humble citizen.

"Is this a sign of divine things?" you ask. It is at the root of all brotherliness; it was what called forth that stern remark, back in the '40's, when, seeing a slave girl sold on the block, he exclaimed: "If ever I get a chance to hit that cursed institution, I will hit it hard." It was that which gave him his trust in generals and statesmen after others were worn to exasperation with their shortcomings. It was this which, more than anything else, made the South as well as the North, groan in anguish when the assassin's bullet laid him low.

It may be that men have questioned Mr. Lincoln's religion; it may be they have dwelt often upon the coarser sides of his nature; but if I read my New Testament aright—if I grasp at all the spirit of the Saviour of the World—if I understand even a little of the fruits of the Spirit—I had rather have my name crossed off the books of the Christian Church, with his character, than to leave it on if I were thereby to be deprived of that honest, sympathetic soul which to all time will make Abraham Lincoln a hero among the sons of men.























